

Find It On The Ground

CW4 PRINCETON SOH

C COMPANY, 2/82 AVIATION REGIMENT

FORT BRAGG, N.C.

I was a UH-60L pilot in command during a multiship formation field training exercise. Our mission was to sling load 105 mm howitzers and their crew from one point to another about 20 minutes away under night vision goggles.

Our formation arrived late in the afternoon, and each crew met with the air mission commander and the supported unit for an update before performing the mission. During the briefing, we were told the landing zone had become obscured by fog. The decision was made to cancel the mission and leave our aircraft in the pickup zone while we dispatched ground vehicles to transport the crews back to the field site. Each crew was told they should return to their aircraft and await further instructions.

Upon returning to my aircraft, the crew and I promptly secured the rotor blades and all required covers. We then piled into the cabin to help ourselves to some meals, ready-to-eat. A few minutes into our meal, the other crews in our flight started their auxiliary power units. Thinking they were just performing radio checks, we stuck our heads out of the cabin doors to see what was going on. We noticed every other crew in the flight had started their APUs and some were starting their engines. As I put on my gear to get the radio online, I yelled to my crew to get the aircraft ready. Just as I got system power, I could hear over the radio that the flight was indeed getting ready for takeoff.

I rushed through the checklist to get the engines started and called out to the crew chiefs to finish untying the aircraft. We managed to get our goggles on and focused just in time to hear the flight crew call in their status.

We were still behind the rest of the flight, but we continued to rush through our start. Once we were caught up, I took a moment to double-check the cockpit switches. Lights, switches, doors secured ... then I looked out my window and noticed something flapping behind my shoulder. Pitot cover! I called to the crew chiefs to check the Pitot tubes and make sure the covers were off. They weren't—and we were just about to take off. The crew chiefs quickly secured the covers and we were off for a flight back to the assembly area.

Since then, I've pictured in my mind what could have happened if the covers had been left on. In my haste to get the aircraft started, I gave up my routine of a before-flight walk-around and instead decided to focus on getting the engines started. Additionally, I knew we were behind the rest of the flight, which accelerated my motivation to get up in the air. I'm lucky to have seen the Pitot covers when I did. We could've easily rushed into an accident. Yep, it's always better to find a mistake on the ground than in the air.